



By Chris Bigenho

Mining for Gold

Imagine starting your day with a cup of coffee while you browse an electronic copy of *The Daily Me*—all the blogs, wikis, podcasts, social networks, social bookmarking sites, newspaper articles, and television and radio programs that you find interesting without all of the “other stuff” getting in the way.

It's all possible, thanks to RSS (Real Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary), which allows Internet users to control the information they receive through subscriptions. A program known as an aggregator collects new information posted on the Internet. Users can then visit a single page to view all the new information in their aggregators.

If you're a political junkie, for example, you may want to subscribe to both conservative and liberal blogs, commentary sites, and mainstream media pages. Suppose you are also a history teacher and this week the class topic is domestic politics related to the Middle East. You simply adjust your feeds to pull information on Middle East relations. At the end of the unit, you change your RSS subscriptions to follow domestic health care.

As relevant items rise to the top of your reading list, you bookmark several articles for your students to access through your school's learning management system (LMS) or Web site. This way, your students can read the material before coming to class. During class, students supply materials that add to the richness of your discussion. Because your students are also using RSS technology with social bookmarking sites, all of these resources are available in one place. And because you are a tech-savvy teacher,

you also have placed this course feed in your school's LMS.

As a director of educational technology and as a national speaker, I am often asked how I keep up with all the changes and advances in ed tech. I wish I could say that I am able to process vast amounts of information on the fly. The truth is that RSS allows me to pull together rapidly changing and mounting information. I encourage you to stay with me as I introduce you to the world of RSS, one of the least used and understood of all the Web 2.0 tools.

What is RSS?

RSS technology has two parts: feeds and aggregators. RSS feeds use a special type of HTML known as XML. Each feed is defined with channel tags, which contain specific information that defines individual items. Aggregators read these special tags, track each subscribed page, and notify you when new items are added.

You can find RSS feeds on many Internet sites. News pages often denote a feed with an orange icon showing the letters RSS or XML. These feeds are organized by topic and region. In this way, you can subscribe to topics such as business news in Asia or religion in the Middle East. Feeds can also come from blogs, wikis, and podcasts. (See *Trying Out RSS* on page 20.)

RSS readers or aggregators are divided into two classes: client side and Internet hosted. Recent Apple operating systems as well as Microsoft

Vista have integrated aggregators, and most browsers now have options for feed readers. I prefer to use Internet-hosted readers because you can reach your feeds from any computer connected to the Internet rather than being limited to access from your personal computer. Some of the more popular Internet-hosted readers are Bloglines, Netvibes, iGoogle, and Google Reader.

Client-based aggregators include those integrated into operating systems and browsers such as Safari for Mac and Windows Live and Vista for PC. Now that we've looked at how RSS works, let's talk about some ways you can use RSS in your classroom.

Subscribe to student blogs. One of the difficulties with student blogs is keeping track of what students are writing. You can waste a lot of time checking the blogs each day to see if the stu-



By using Bloglines with the Bloglines Notifier,
I receive notification every time one of my students posts a blog.
No more wasted trips to the blogosphere.



RSS Technologies Find the Nuggets for You

dents have written. Or you can use a feed aggregator and subscribe to each student's blog.

Although any aggregator will work, I prefer Bloglines because of its ability to run in the background with a small program called a notifier. Bloglines Notifier tracks the blog subscriptions, and an icon pops up on my screen when students post new content.

Almost every blog engine has the ability to share content through RSS subscriptions. I have my students set up a personal blog account on Blogger and e-mail me the blog address. Blogger automatically creates the RSS feed. I simply paste the student's blog URL in Bloglines and click subscribe. By using Bloglines with the Bloglines Notifier, I receive notification every time one of my students posts a blog. No more wasted trips to the blogosphere.

Subscribe to social bookmarks. Social bookmarking sites such as Delicious allow you to keep all of your favorite Internet sites online. I use self-defined tags to categorize entries. I create tags for each of my classes, and because Delicious supports multiple tags, I assign topical tags as well. If I share this tagging structure with my students, they can also save resources to the "class tag," which is then accessible as a subscription. I create a subscription out of the class tag and add the RSS feed to one of my aggregators and in my LMS. This way, all resources that the class collects are available to the entire class through one site. This has proven to be a fantastic use of RSS

technology in a collaborative learning environment.

Feeding content to HTML pages. This is one of my favorites. You can find any feed online and create a JavaScript that you can place on a Web page or in your LMS. This script pulls the dynamic content into the course. And you don't have to know code to pull this off. You can build custom feeds using a tool called Feed2JS. (See Creating a Custom Feed below.)

I have used this technique to create custom feeds for teachers based on very specific information. In a course

titled *As the World Turns*, a teacher could use current news to drive the direction and content of the course. Topics for the course could be divided by geographic region: South America, North America, Europe, Asia, East Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Using feeds from multiple news sites from these regions, I can pull them together as regional feeds and make them all available in one location on a Web page or in the LMS. This makes it easy to compare news as reported in and about different regions of the world.

Now that you have been introduced to the world of RSS, it is time to bring

Creating a Custom Feed

Open the document where you want to build the feed. This can be a wiki page, a simple HTML page on the school site, or an HTML page in an LMS such as Moodle or Blackboard. Keep the page open.

Open your browser window and locate your desired feed. Copy the URL of your feed.

Open another browser tab or window and launch Feed2JS (<http://feed2js.org>).

Click the Build tab.

Paste the URL of your feed in the line for the URL.

Select your desired options.

I recommend these settings:

Show Channel = Yes

Number of Items to Display = 5 to 10

Show Description = 1

Show Posting Date = Yes

Open Links in New Window = Yes

You don't need to worry about any other settings.

Click Generate JavaScript (right button).

Highlight and copy all of the code in the window.

There should be about 10 lines of code.

Navigate to your LMS course.

A link to the open page should be at the bottom of your window.

Paste the JavaScript code in this window where HTML formatting is allowed.

Click Add to save changes.

You should now see your feed.

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Trying Out RSS

You can dip your toe into the water of RSS by going to the ISTE homepage (www.iste.org) and clicking on the orange RSS icon next to the news archive button. Or, if you already have a reader set up, paste <http://www.iste.org/AM/rssfeed.cfm> into the subscription field.

You can also subscribe to RSS feeds on the ISTE Ning, including content on the L&L group discussion board. Click on the RSS icon or paste http://www.iste-community.org/group/landl/forum/topic/list?feed=yes&xn_auth=no into your reader's subscription field.

For more information on using RSS in the classroom, check out the ISTE book *RSS for Educators: Blogs, Newsfeeds, Podcasts, and Wikis in the Classroom* by John G. Hendron.

Hendron's book explains how to use a news aggregator to harness the power of RSS for a variety of purposes, including classroom projects, professional development, and keeping students and parents informed.

The book is available at www.iste.org/store.



this powerful technology to your classroom. Explore the links in this article and set up your personal copy of *The Daily Me*.

Resources

Blogger: www.blogger.com
Bloglines: www.bloglines.com
Delicious: <http://delicious.com>
Feed2JS: <http://feed2js.org>
Google Reader: www.google.com/reader
iGoogle: www.google.com/ig
Netvibes: www.netvibes.com



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